

Parental Involvement in Career Decision-Making After Class 10: A Qualitative Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Career decision-making involves the process of exploring alternatives, comparing them, and making informed choices about future career paths. Parental involvement, defined as the active participation of parents in their children's education and career-related decisions, plays a critical role in shaping students' higher studies and career choices. This study examines the dynamics of parental involvement in the career decision-making process of Class 10 students in Kerala, an Indian state undergoing significant social and cultural transformations in parent-child relations and career aspirations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 27 parents from five government schools in Kerala, following a career guidance program. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed six key themes. The themes are indicative of parents' growing trust in their children's decision-making abilities, the influential role of elder siblings, the impact of peer and senior networks, a strong preference for the science stream, a mixed attitude towards student migration, and a complex patriarchal control in decision-making. Parental influence emerged as a complex interplay of financial concerns, societal expectations, indirect decision-making strategies, and parental insecurities. The findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive career guidance programs that address the choices and concerns of both parents and students. These insights are particularly relevant in Kerala's evolving educational landscape, where global trends and local contexts intersect to redefine career decision-making processes.

Keywords: *Parental Involvement, Career Decision-making, Kerala, Thematic Analysis, Guidance Programs*

The career decision-making process for adolescents has gained increasing attention from researchers, educators, and policymakers, especially in Kerala, India. Known for its high literacy rates and emphasis on education (Kerala State Planning Board, 2022), Kerala stands out as a unique socio-cultural context where parental involvement plays a critical role in shaping career aspirations. With ongoing socio-economic transformations, such as urbanization, globalization, and migration trends (Rajan, 2024), the nature of parental influence has become more complex. These shifts create opportunities for diversification in career choices while simultaneously challenging traditional parental roles.

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The introduction of new career opportunities, societal changes, and increased exposure to global trends have led to a transition in parents' role in career decision-making. Parents must now strike the delicate balance between maintaining aspirations for their children and encouraging autonomy in an increasingly competitive and dynamic job market (Chaturvedi & Saimons, 2022). The middle-class aspirations prevalent in Kerala intensify the expectations placed on students, particularly at the critical juncture after Class 10, when academic streams are selected. This study aims to explore these dynamics, with a specific focus on the evolving role of parents, the impact of socio-economic factors, and the interplay between parental guidance and student autonomy.

Parental involvement in career decision-making is deeply rooted in various theoretical perspectives. The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) explains how behavior, such as career decision-making, is influenced by attitudes and subjective norms, including parental expectations (Zhang et al., 2014). Social Cognitive Theory highlights the importance of observational learning and modeling, emphasizing parents' roles as critical sources of guidance and encouragement in shaping career aspirations (Rogers & Creed, 2011). Person-Environment Fit theories (Jones, 1994; Nauta, 2013) underscore the significance of aligning students' strengths and interests with career opportunities, a process often facilitated by parental discussions and support. Developmental Career Theories (Super, 1957) provide a dynamic view of parental influence, showing how it evolves from direct control during childhood to collaborative and supportive roles in adolescence.

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated the positive impact of parental involvement on students' career aspirations and decision-making processes. Khatri and Periwal (2020) highlighted the critical role of familial guidance in shaping career paths, particularly in collectivist societies. Similarly, Koçak et al., (2021) identified the significant role of parental encouragement in enhancing students' career decision-making self-efficacy.

Parental involvement is also linked to improved academic performance, which serves as a foundation for career aspirations. A meta-analysis by Fan and Chen (2001) showed that parental engagement enhances academic achievement and, by extension, career confidence. Wang and Dong (2024), in a meta-analysis, identified a significant relationship between supportive parental behaviors and students' career adaptability, emphasizing the role of parents in helping adolescents navigate complex career landscapes. Kukreja and Mahapatra (2024) found a positive correlation between parental encouragement and self-efficacy in career decision-making among young adults in India. Akosah-Twumasi et al. (2018), in their systematic review, examined existing literature on factors that influence youths' career choices in both collectivist and individualistic cultural settings across diverse cultural contexts. The authors found that youth from collectivist cultures were mainly influenced by family expectations, and a higher career congruence with parents increased career confidence and self-efficacy. In individualistic settings, personal interest was highlighted as the major factor that influenced career choice, and the youth were more independent in their career decision-making.

Cultural and Economic Contexts

In collectivist cultures like India, where family expectations and interdependence are deeply embedded, parents act as primary decision-makers in their children's (Chadda & Deb, 2013). Family expectations often play a dominant role in career decision-making. Parents frequently prioritize financially secure and socially prestigious careers, such as medicine and engineering, over students' personal interests (Olaosebikan & Olusakin, 2014). In Bhutan,

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economic pressures were found to influence parents to guide their children toward stable career options, often limiting the exploration of unconventional paths. Despite these constraints, studies show that parental encouragement remains essential in fostering students' confidence and independence in making career decisions (Sawitri & Perdhana, 2020).

Rationale of the present study

The transitional phase after Class 10 is particularly significant, as it requires students to make decisions that heavily influence their academic and professional futures. This stage is characterized by heightened parental involvement due to the long-term implications of the students' decisions. However, with increased exposure to global trends, online resources, and unconventional career paths, modern parents are adapting their roles, balancing traditional expectations with support for independent decision-making. This changing relationship between parents' involvement and students' freedom in choosing a career is a compelling area of research because it has big implications for understanding and helping teens at this decisive juncture. The study aims to examine the role of parental involvement in shaping the career decision-making processes of students after completing Class 10. Specifically, it seeks to evaluate how parental engagement impacts students' career aspirations, explore the influence of parent-child discussions on career choices, and analyze the effects of parental expectations and socio-economic factors on the decision-making process. It addresses key questions related to how parents deal with their awareness about available career options and how external influences, such as relatives, friends, and siblings, shape these decisions. Given the limited prior research on this specific topic, a qualitative inquiry is particularly suited for this study as it allows for an initial exploration of the nuanced and evolving dynamics of parental involvement and student decision-making.

METHOD

Research Design

A qualitative, cross-sectional design was adopted to explore parental involvement in career decision-making.

Key Variables

- 1. Parental involvement:** Parental involvement encompasses various forms of engagement by parents in their child's education and career-related decision-making. It includes direct participation, such as discussing career options and providing guidance, as well as indirect support, such as offering emotional encouragement and financial assistance. This concept also incorporates the influence of parental expectations and values on career choices (Fan & Chen, 2001; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994).
- 2. Career decision-making:** Career decision-making refers to the process through which Class 10 students explore, evaluate, and choose career paths based on their interests, abilities, values, and external influences, especially parental guidance. This dynamic process is shaped by familial, societal, and economic factors, drawing from career development theories (Gati et al., 2012; Super, 1980).

Sample

The sample consisted of 27 parents (mothers and fathers) of students who completed Class 10 in government schools in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, and attended a career guidance program. The program comprised an online career aptitude test, a career counseling session, and a career guidance session. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in socio-economic backgrounds.

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Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the regional language Malayalam with parents who participated in the career guidance program along with their children. Semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility to capture nuanced perspectives while maintaining a systematic approach to data collection.

Questions in the interview schedule were:

1. How much are you aware of your child's higher education opportunities after class 10?
 2. What are your and your child's likes, interests, and desires about higher studies after class 10?
 3. What are your worries regarding your child's higher education after class 10?
 4. Who are the others with whom you have discussed what your child should study after class 10?
 5. Describe the decision-making process regarding your child's study-related decisions.
- Suitable probes were also used in the interview.

Procedure

Data were collected from parents of Class 10 students attending five government schools in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Parents who accompanied their children to Block Resource Centers for the career counseling program. Informed consent was obtained, adhering to ethical standards, with assurances of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with either the mother or father of the students. Interviews lasted between 10 and 25 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent. Participants were informed that excerpts of their interviews might be used in research and publications.

Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively. Emerging themes were identified through systematic coding, followed by a detailed analysis of the content and frequency of recurring themes. Thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes.

The process involved six steps:

1. Familiarization with data through repeated reading
2. Initial coding to capture key features
3. Identifying broader themes
4. Reviewing and refining themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

RESULT OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed as an orthographic transcript—a verbatim of all verbal utterances and relevant known verbal behaviour in the interview. Initial codes were generated from these transcripts. Themes were identified from these codes by reading them repeatedly and thus identifying the patterns.

The following sections discuss the themes identified through thematic analysis.

1. From guardians to guides: Parents trusting their children's choices

Seventeen out of 27 parents expressed trust in their children's ability to make informed career decisions. This approach reflects a gradual departure from traditional decision-making hierarchies, wherein parents acknowledge that children today have better access to career information and insights. Parents often described themselves as supporters and validators rather than decision-makers. One parent shared, "It's his life, his choice. Let him study whatever he wants" (Parent 4, personal communication, May 21, 2024). Another parent reflected, "We should stand with our child's interests; it's not our interests that are important" (Parent 21, personal communication, May 23, 2024). "He has identified his area of interest and has even undergone some coaching in that area. Children are now updated about a lot of stuff. They are up to date, we are not," a parent explained plainly (Parent 23, personal communication, May 24, 2024). "My son has told me he wanted to do a business on pet farming and wanted to study courses related to it," Certain parents, like parent 17 (personal communication, May 23, 2024) are informed by their children of specific career paths.

The realisation that children know better has led to acceptance in the parents of the latter's primary role in career decision-making. This shift is reflective of both enhanced information and changing parenting styles, resulting in an increasing level of trust in children's decisions.

However, this trust often comes with implicit controls. Parents frequently reported cross-checking their children's preferences and subtly steering them toward choices they deemed practical or prestigious. As one parent explained, "Even though my child has the ability to make decisions, it's his father who does everything for him" (Parent 8, personal communication, May 22, 2024). This reflects what Dutta et al. (2021) describe as "informed parental influence," where 'autonomy is encouraged but monitored'. Social Cognitive Career Theory (Bandura, 1986; Lent et al., 1994) supports this, highlighting how self-efficacy develops when individuals are allowed to make decisions within a supportive environment. In Kerala's collectivistic culture, this blend of autonomy and control reflects a shift toward modern parenting practices.

2. Sibling bridges: The role of elder siblings in career pathways

Elder siblings, particularly sisters, emerged as crucial influencers, serving as advisors and role models. Younger children often looked up to their elder siblings for guidance, and parents acknowledged their trust in these sibling dynamics. One parent mentioned, "Decisions regarding his studies are taken by his elder sister. She helps him in his studies" (Parent 10, personal communication, May 22, 2024). Another observed, "He does everything as his sister says" (Parent 5, personal communication, May 21, 2024). Similarly, a parent noted, "His cousins helped him to choose what he wanted to study" (Parent 12, personal communication, May 22, 2024). The guiding role of the elder sisters was reported by six parents.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) provides a framework for understanding this dynamic, where younger children emulate their elder siblings' career paths based on observational learning. This influence is particularly pronounced in Kerala's mostly collectivistic family structure, where elder siblings are often viewed as mediators between parental expectations and individual aspirations. The role of sisters is suggestive of the lead role taken by young women in contemporary families.

3. The social sphere impact: Peer and senior influence

Peers and seniors exerted significant influence on students' career choices, often shaping their preferences and aspirations. As many as eight parents noted their children's inclination to emulate successful peers or seniors, seeking validation through shared experiences. One parent shared, "He chose that because his seniors and teachers said so" (Parent 14, personal communication, May 23, 2024). Another added, "If my son wants to go abroad, I'm ready to send him if he has good friends who study well" (Parent 9, personal communication, May 22, 2024).

Peers and societal influences often converge to reinforce societal biases toward specific academic streams, such as science. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) highlights how external networks, such as peer groups and school environments, intersect with family influences to shape career choices.

4. Science as the stream of prestige and promise

The societal preference for the science stream emerged as a dominant theme, driven by perceptions of financial stability and professional prestige. Parents frequently viewed science as a flexible and lucrative pathway, especially in fields like medicine, engineering, and nursing. One parent reported, "When I said my child was choosing commerce, my friends told me to tell her to choose science" (Parent 11, personal communication, May 22, 2024). Another shared, "If she takes science, it will help her to select any career in the future" (Parent 7, personal communication, May 21, 2024). Yet another noted, "It's better to take science; it will help to study further and go abroad. If she takes humanities, she'll be trapped here" (Parent 4, personal communication, May 21, 2024). Thirteen parents expressed their explicit preference for the science stream.

Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles et al., 1983) explains how parental emphasis on high-reward careers shapes children's aspirations.

5. Roots or wings: Attachment, opportunities and insecurities

Parents have a mixed attitude about their children going abroad for studies or work. Many parents express reluctance to send their children abroad despite acknowledging the potential career benefits. One parent explained, "We wish for him to study near home so we can be there for him." (Parent 15, personal communication, May 23, 2024). Among this sample, the reluctance seems to reflect a number of aspects, viz., emotional attachment, apprehensions, and insecurities (Bowlby, 1982). A participant added, "We have less interest in sending him abroad for studies. We wish him to be with us. We do not know what will be a different culture like." (Parent 20, personal communication, May 23, 2024).

Interestingly, three mothers whose husbands are working abroad showed keen interest in sending their children overseas for studies and work. Those who are already exposed to overseas life are confident about their children exploring the larger world. A mother reflected, "Her father told her he'd take her with him abroad." (Parent 16, personal communication, May 23, 2024).

Research indicates that parents play a crucial role in the decision-making process regarding studying abroad, often balancing their aspirations for their children with their own fears and concerns (Redwine et al., 2017). As parents increasingly recognize study abroad as a strategic investment in their children's future, they become more supportive of international educational

opportunities. However, concerns about cultural adaptation and academic disruption persist, influencing their willingness to support such decisions (Global Admissions, 2023).

6. Guardians under pressure: Financial constraints and career choices

Financial challenges significantly shaped parental decisions, particularly among families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This amounted to almost 40% of the parents. They emphasized career paths with immediate job prospects. As one parent shared, “I want to support my child according to his interests. But we have no money” (Parent 18, personal communication, May 22, 2024). Another explained, “My husband died two years ago. I want to support my child to study whatever he wants. But our financial situation is bad” (Parent 21, personal communication, May 23, 2024).

Bourdieu’s Cultural and Social Capital Theory (1986) provides a framework for understanding how limited economic resources constrain career choices.

7. Patriarchy still reigns: Fathers as final decision-makers

The study reveals that fathers often play a central role in the family’s decision-making process, particularly when it comes to choosing subjects or career paths for their children. This reflects a traditional patriarchal structure, where the father’s opinion is seen as decisive, and other family members, including the child, may have limited input. “Even though my child has the ability to make decisions, it’s his father who does everything for him from childhood,” parent 11 reported (personal communication, May 22, 2024). “Decisions are made by him. If they are right, we are ready to support him,” (Parent 5, personal communication, May 21, 2024). More responses are there similar to these ones. “I am the one who makes decisions regarding my child’s studies. If he talks about his interests, I’m ready to support him.” (Parent 22, personal communication, May 24, 2024). “We are ready to send him to study according to his preferences. But the decisions are taken by his father. We have told him that we’ll support him to study what he likes.” (Parent 6, personal communication, May 21, 2024).

These statements contain mixed messages. Parents claim that their children are free to decide; in the same way, they declare that they are the ones who make decisions for the children. In a large number of families (14 families), fathers are found to be the prominent persons who make decisions for their child. Parents are found to appreciate their children’s decision-making ability and are proud about their children’s knowledge level. At the same time, they cross-check their children’s plans, and take the decisions by themselves.

A mother stated, “His father checks every decision; nothing happens without his approval” (Parent 27, personal communication, May 24, 2024). Another reflected, “We are ready to support him and study what he likes. But if we let him decide whatever he wants, it’s not going to work” (Parent 19, personal communication, May 23, 2024).

This authority often manifests as indirect control, where fathers frame their influence as protective oversight rather than coercion. While fathers may respect their child’s preferences and abilities, many still feel that they need to guide or even control the final outcome, ensuring that their child’s choices align with what they consider to be practical and beneficial for the family’s future. This dynamic showcases the tension between evolving parental attitudes and deep-rooted cultural norms of authority and control.

Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem layer situates fathers’ roles as authoritative figures within a hierarchical family structure. However, this authority was often couched in subtle control,

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with fathers framing their influence as guidance rather than coercion. Chaturvedi and Saimons (2022) similarly found that Indian fathers often justify their control as a form of protective oversight.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal a complex interplay of familial roles, societal expectations, and economic constraints in career decision-making. Parents try to strike a delicate balance between fostering autonomy and exercising control, reflecting both evolving attitudes and entrenched cultural norms. Siblings and peers expand the decision-making network, while financial limitations and emotional bonds shape career trajectories.

These themes underscore the need for culturally sensitive interventions that empower parents to support their children's aspirations while promoting informed, autonomous decisions. Counseling programs should address societal biases, educate families on diverse career paths, and foster open communication to bridge the gap between parental expectations and student interests. To conclude, the study reflects a complex mix of parental expectations, societal influences, financial concerns, and evolving recognition of children's autonomy. While parents generally support their children's aspirations, external pressures such as financial constraints, societal norms favouring science, and the influence of relatives or siblings play a substantial role in shaping their final decisions.

Implications of the Study

The study underscores the strong parental influence on subject selection, driven by societal biases favoring science over humanities and commerce, highlighting the need for balanced career awareness initiatives. Targeted scholarships and support programs are advocated considering financial constraints that have emerged as a critical factor shaping academic choices, especially for lower-income families. Including elder siblings also in family-based career counseling sessions will be helpful in view of the elder siblings' potential role in career guidance. The importance of engaging broader social networks in educational interventions is also emphasized since external influences such as teachers, relatives, and peers significantly impact subject selection.

Limitations of the Study

Exclusion of parents from private schools and alternative curricula (e.g., CBSE, ICSE) narrows the diversity of perspectives. Interviewing only one parent per family may overlook joint decision-making dynamics, especially in patriarchal family structures. The emphasis on parental influence underrepresents other critical factors like peer pressure, school resources, and career counseling access. The financial concerns highlighted may not fully represent middle-class or affluent families, where other factors, such as global exposure, might dominate decision-making.

Suggestions for Future Research

- Include parents from private schools and alternative curricula to capture more diverse perspectives.
- Involve both parents to provide a more complete picture of family decision-making dynamics.
- Expand the study to include students, offering insights into their perspectives on parental involvement.

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- Conduct longitudinal studies to track how parental involvement evolves as children transition from school to higher education or the workforce.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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